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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000665

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM PREL KDEM KPAO BBG AM
SUBJECT: RFE/RL BUREAU CHIEF ASSAULT LATEST IN A SERIES OF
INCIDENTS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The acting Yerevan bureau chief of RFE/RL was lightly injured in an assault August 18 by a man who proclaimed anti-RFE/RL sentiments during the attack. CDA met with RFE/RL officials August 20 to discuss the incident, and the general situation of RFE/RL in Armenia, which had seemed to be improving. This incident follows the August 12 beating of opposition reporter Lusine Barseghian, and May/June assaults on opposition-related youth activists. END SUMMARY.

ASSAULT ON RFE/RL PROGRAMMING TURNS LITERAL

¶2. (SBU) Acting Yerevan Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty bureau chief Hrach Melkumian was assaulted in a well-traveled, downtown Yerevan park on the evening of August 18 while walking home from the office not long before sunset. The assailant called out to Melkumian by name, Melkumian turned and allowed the man to approach, whereupon he was abruptly attacked bare-handed. The assailant continued hitting Melkumian for several minutes, all the while uttering harsh statements about RFE/RL's content, alleging the radio station is too pro-oppositional. Passers-by declined to intervene, nor did police stationed at a busy intersection no more than 30 yards away. Melkumian eventually was able to escape the scene. When he returned some minutes later in search of his eyeglasses, which had been lost in the scuffle, he was startled to find his attacker still at the scene, sitting and speaking calmly into a mobile telephone. Melkumian went to the police station to record a complaint, and was later accompanied to the scene of the attack by two police officers, hoping to catch sight of the attacker, who by that time had left. Melkumian was treated for minor injuries at the local hospital. President Serzh Sargsian publicly condemned the attack on Melkumian and ordered police to investigate, and the Prosecutor General announced that a criminal case had been launched.

¶4. (SBU) Post obtained from Melkumian the basic outline of the story on August 19, and Melkumian visited the embassy August 20, calling on CDA with two RFE/RL managers coincidentally visiting from Prague to interview candidates for the bureau chief position. (Melkumian is ordinarily based in Prague, where he works for the Armenia Liberty service, but has filled in as temporary Yerevan bureau chief since May. Melkumian was previously the Yerevan bureau chief for many years before being promoted to the Prague position.) After a brief discussion, CDA and RFE/RL visitors agreed that the incident seemed clearly to be a targeted attack by an individual sympathetic to the ruling Armenian regime, but beyond that it is impossible to say.

RFE/RL'S UPS AND DOWNS IN ARMENIA

¶5. (SBU) The discussion moved on to RFE/RL's ongoing search for a new bureau chief, which RFE/RL hoped to have wrapped up within three weeks. RFE/RL managers acknowledged that the Yerevan bureau has lately been roiled by competing personality cliques mirroring the political polarization in Armenian society, with some staff

sympathetic to the opposition and others with family ties to the ruling party. The hope is that new leadership of the bureau may be able to bridge this divide, though the Prague-based management opined that such divisions are not unusual in newsrooms in most Western capitals. (COMMENT: This glib assertion understates the level of bitter acrimony and politically-motivated back-biting that has plagued the Yerevan bureau since the 2007/2008 election cycle, but this probably amounts to RFE/RL seeking to keep its dirty laundry private. END COMMENT)

¶ 6. (SBU) The Prague managers insisted that there was never any merit to government claims of bias during the election campaign, and if there were, RFE/RL could obviously never fire editorial staff under outside political pressure, and that any perceived improvement in the balance of RFE/RL coverage was simply a result of an ongoing RFE/RL push to improve rigor, balance, and professionalism across the board. Nonetheless, the Prague managers were pleased at their perception that Armenian authorities seemingly had ended their crusade against RFE/RL, and noted the service had even been complimented on a story by President Sargsian's press spokesman. RFE/RL is also once again invited to government press conferences, which had stopped during the earlier period of acrimony between the government and RFE/RL. Poloff commented that it was former President Kocharian, and not then-PM Serzh Sargsian, who harbored a particularly sharp personal animus against RFE/RL. The RFE/RL managers thanked CDA for the embassy's steadfast support and advocacy with GOAM officials during the rocky period. We noted that long-planned billboard advertisements of the Armenia Liberty Service would soon appear across Armenia, funded by FSA assistance funds, and that one purpose of this was to signal the U.S. Government's backing for the RFE/RL network. (COMMENT: Again, our RFE/RL colleagues seemed a bit more anxious to hide dirty linen than speak frankly. Our impression is that the Armenia Liberty service had aired at least a few programs that leaned a little far toward the opposition, and RFE/RL management spotted a genuine problem with

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editorial controls and political balance, which they moved to correct. Our billboard campaign will not make any explicit reference to the U.S. Embassy, but our government interlocutors know that we are paying for the billboards. END COMMENT)

OTHER RECENT ASSAULTS

¶ 7. (SBU) Several other assaults in recent months reveal the continuing ferment underlying the political situation. On August 12, Lusine Barseghian, of the strongly pro-LTP newspaper Haykakhan Zhamanak (Armenian Times) was ambushed outside her parents' apartment building, and was briefly hospitalized for injuries sustained from kicks and punches. The assailants soon fled as passers-by began to gather. Opposition newspapers all decried the incident as the handiwork of pro-government thugs seeking to intimidate the strident Haykakhan Zhamanak staff.

¶ 8. (SBU) Two opposition-linked youth activists were assaulted in May and June, while a prominent human rights NGO leader was attacked by a known pro-government agitator. On May 21, Mikhael Danielyan, who heads the well-known and reliable Helsinki Association human rights NGO, was attacked with an air pistol that fires tear gas capsules by a thuggish pro-government activist, Tigran Urikhanian. Urikhanian was questioned by police, but never charged despite clear witnesses to the attack. On May 28, Arsen Kharatian, a leader of the pro-Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) opposition youth movement Sksel (Start), was assaulted by several other youths in downtown Yerevan, and hospitalized with moderate head injuries. On June 25, another opposition youth activist, Narek Hovakimian, from the pro-LTP Hima (Now) movement, was pummeled by a small group of young men unknown to him, and was hospitalized with injuries to his head and abdomen.

COMMENT

¶ 9. (SBU) These incidents of physical assault represent a continuing pattern of harassment and danger for journalists and activists

perceived as hostile to the current authorities. None of these cases has been solved by police. The public statements by the president and prosecutor general were welcome signs that authorities are taking this most recent incident seriously. It seems to us unlikely that these incidents were all just random attacks by angry individuals -- our experience is that the pro-government circles do not inspire such passionate loyalty as to arouse supporters to spontaneous outbursts of partisan enthusiasm. Rather, these incidents seem likely to have been directed by someone in the pro-governmental constellation, but determining precisely who is behind them is of course more difficult.

PENNINGTON